

Lister Sinclair

Good evening, and welcome to *Ideas*. I'm Lister Sinclair with the final program of David Cayley's series "The Education Debates." During the last generation agreement about the proper course of study in the humanities has tended to break down. The curriculum has been attacked as too white, too Western, too male, and reforms have been undertaken in many universities to address these complaints. Some people have seen the resulting changes as a descent into shallow relativism, a falling away from tradition, passion and purpose in undergraduate education - a closing of the mind, as the late Allan Bloom put it. Others have perceived an opening into a new, less authoritarian kind of education in which conflict over the curriculum enlivens the curriculum, and students are free to pass beyond old limitations of nation, tradition and gender to become true citizens of the world. Our speakers tonight represent this second, more cheerful perspective. First you will hear, philosopher and classicist Martha Nussbaum. She's the author of Cultivating Humanity, a new book which argues that the opening of the curriculum advances the ideal of a liberal education rather than foreclosing it, as conservative critics have said. In the second half of the program Gerald Graff, the author of Beyond the Culture Wars, proposes what he calls "teaching the conflicts." Presenting books as sites of contestation rather than as forbidding monuments of culture, he says, can be a way of engaging students with texts from which they might otherwise remain alienated. Gerald Graff and Martha Nussbaum, in Part 15 of "The Education Debates" by David Cayley.

David Cayley

In early 1988 an article appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education called "It Is Not Elitist To Place Major Literature at the Center of the English Curriculum." In this article, the head of the English Department at the Pennsylvania State University, Christopher Clausen, wrote that he "would be willing to bet that [Alice Walker's novel] The Color Purple is taught in more English courses today than all of Shakespeare's plays combined." His article was widely disseminated, and other writers of like mind soon transformed Clausen's admitted guess into a firm claim - further proof that the classics were on the ropes. I can myself remember having a vague impression around this time that The Color Purple was taking over the English curriculum, though I could not have told you the source until I read Gerald Graff's Beyond The Culture Wars. Graff, himself an English professor, took the trouble to check Clausen's wager against the actual situation at Northwestern University, where Graff then taught. He examined the course offerings between 1986 and 1990 and found that Walker's novel had been taught in only two courses, as opposed to eight that required at least six plays by Shakespeare, and eight more that required at least two. When he calculated the number of students who read Shakespeare against the number who read Walker, he came up with a score of Shakespeare 83, Walker 1. Professor Clausen's guess, which seemed so plausible but proved so groundless, is typical of the somewhat panicky tenor of much of the writing on universities that appeared in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Lately, however, I have the impression that something of a counter-attack has been launched against this apocalyptic genre. Graff's Beyond the Culture Wars, which is discussed in

the second half of tonight's show, was one of its opening salvoes. Then, in 1995, historian Lawrence Levine turned Allan Bloom's famous The Closing of the American Mind on its head with The Opening of the American Mind. Martha Nussbaum's Cultivating Humanity, published in 1997, continues this strain, arguing that American higher education is on the whole "in a healthy state." Nussbaum is professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago. She calls Cultivating Humanity "a classical defence of reform in liberal education" because it argues that the teachings of many classical philosophers, from Socrates to Seneca, support an open, wide-ranging curriculum and not a restrictive traditionalism based on a canon of great books. The argument began to take shape, she says, when she reviewed Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind for the New York Review of Books in 1987.

Martha Nussbaum

In that review I focused on Bloom's treatment of the Greeks because I felt that he started out saying that he was a big fan of Socrates, but he ended up saying we should go back to a curriculum based on the great books. And I thought there was a real tension in that argument, because if you think about what the Greek philosophers themselves have to say about what an education should be, they're extremely skeptical and suspicious of an education that's based on assimilating and internalizing the great ideas of the culture. They think that that deadens the mind and they want a mind that's questioning, that wants to take charge of its own thinking rather than just passively receiving what tradition gives it. So I said that in the review, very briefly, but then some publishers approached me and said 'are you interested in doing a book on this topic?' As the time went on and I saw that Bloom was taken to be the defender of the classics against the assaults of modernity, I really felt there was a need for a book that put things in a more complicated light and tried to bring out some of the great ideas the Greek philosophers themselves had about liberal education, because I think those ideas help us think about what we're doing today.

David Cayley

Nussbaum argues in Cultivating Humanity that during the last generation, American higher education has become more democratic, more critical of tradition and more cosmopolitan. She thinks that these changes have moved American universities closer to classical ideals, rather than farther away from them, as Allan Bloom believed. Both writers cite Socrates, but Nussbaum interprets him very differently than Bloom.

Martha Nussbaum

See, I think what Bloom does, and it's something that there's a lot of controversy about, is to run Socrates and Plato together. Now obviously Plato was very moved by the career of his teacher Socrates, but I think it's equally obvious that at a certain point he broke away from Socrates. Socrates' idea was always that you did philosophy by questioning each and every person you meet, by getting each and every person to think and to reflect for himself and even, I would say herself as well, because Socrates says in the Underworld he expects to question the noble women who are there. He couldn't

see them in Athens because they were all indoors, but he would see them in the afterlife he thought. And it was a very democratic conception of education, because he said, he thought democracy was the best form of government he knew and he viewed himself as a gadfly on the back of a noble but sluggish horse, that is democracy, trying to wake it up, sting it so it was going to do its business in a more reflective way.

Now, by the time we get to Plato's Republic, obviously Plato has grown to hate democracy, to think it's one of the worst forms of government and at the same time, he really does scorn the open practice of philosophical dialectic that Socrates had stood for. He replaces it with a much more esoteric, secret method based on years of specialized training in mathematics and science, something that in the end, is going to reserve philosophy for a few elite leaders and the vast masses of the people in his ideal city don't examine their lives at all. So I think there's a tremendous difference between Plato and Socrates by the time you get to the mature writings of Plato, like The Republic and that Bloom kind of slides over that difference and it's really through this undemocratic conception of the intellectual life that he defends the curriculum based on the great books. So in my review I already took that apart and criticized it, but my own book really takes its stand very squarely with Socrates against the Plato of The Republic and says that yes, our democracy is sluggish and yes, it does need to be waked up by philosophical questioning. I say all undergraduates should have two semesters of philosophy in their undergraduate education, but we do this because it's good for democracy. It produces a more deliberative democracy and not because we think that some people are better than others.

I went out of my way in the book to make this point clear in my choice of students. I spent a lot of time on a student named Billy Tucker whom I met in my health club. He was working behind the desk and he was studying at a business college that happened to have required philosophy courses, and I used Tucker as an example of how these courses make you a better democratic citizen. He'd been listening to talk radio a lot. He thought that political argument was just a matter of slogans and abuse and he learned in those courses what it was to argue in favour of a position that you don't hold yourself. He was absolutely stunned when he was asked to produce arguments against the death penalty, which he favours, and he said from that he learned what it was to actually respect the position of somebody you disagree with, to listen to that argument and try to see what the common ground might be and what the differences might be. So that example was an attempt to show that I think philosophy is of essential importance for every citizen in a democracy and somebody like Billy Tucker is just as important to me as someone at an elite university and maybe, in a way more so, because he's more representative of the average American citizen.

David Cayley

Nussbaum sees philosophy as a popular, democratic practice - open to everyone, essential to the well being of everyone, and capable of making a real difference in the world. In the ancient world, this view passed from Socrates to the Stoic philosophers

who began to appear in Athens in the century after Socrates' death. The Stoic school eventually gained considerable worldly influence, particularly at Rome. The Roman statesman Cicero adopted Stoic ideas; Seneca, another Stoic, became regent of the Empire when Nero was still too young to rule; and the Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius was later Emperor. This convergence of theory and practice, Nussbaum says, reflected the Stoic outlook.

Martha Nussbaum

The Stoic idea really was that theory should be done only for the sake of practice and the practical point that was especially important to them was that our actions should have their origin in reason rather than in mere habit and tradition. Each person should take charge of his or her own thinking, and I do mean her because they were big defenders of women's equality and the equal education of women and they also thought that each human being has infinite worth and dignity because of their rationality and so every human being, whether upper class, lower class, rich or poor, deserves boundless respect and reverence precisely because there is in them reason, by which they mean moral reason, the power of making moral choices, and therefore all these distinctions of class, rank, sex, birth, all of these are irrelevant and we have a fundamental equality with one another based upon our moral capacities.

David Cayley

The Stoic philosophers, particularly the Roman Stoics, left behind them a large body of writings - many of them concerned with education. In Cultivating Humanity Nussbaum draws particular attention to a letter of Seneca's, written to his friend and regular correspondent Lucilius. Lucilius has asked his friend's opinion of the traditional Roman *studia liberales*, or liberal studies.

Martha Nussbaum

Seneca begins by questioning the word *liberales*. Of course, etymologically it's connected to the word for free, but he asks, 'How is this usually understood?' Well usually, it's understood, he says, to mean that a liberal education is an education for the freeborn, that is the one who's already a gentleman. So it's an education for an elite and what it consists in typically, he says, is the rather mindless internalization of great books, people just absorbing their culture's great precepts and not learning to criticize or think very much about them. Now then, he says he himself is going to use the word *liberales* in a very different way. An education for him is truly liberal, that is connected to freedom, only if it's one that makes you free, meaning makes you in charge of your own reasoning, able to run your life by your own thought rather than the thought of habit, of tradition or of your parents or whatever. So that's the basic idea, that in the end of the day we want a truly free person, meaning one who's thought about it all, who has reasons for what he or she does and who is able to exchange arguments and reasons with others in the political sphere, because what we're after is not just individuals living well, but a community that's governed by argument rather than by the whims and passions of the moment.

So, what will that consist in? Well, he says, of course, it doesn't displace the reading of great books. He thinks those are essential nourishment for the mind, but first of all, that reading itself will be done now in a very different way. It will be done not in the old mode that says this is the wisdom of our fathers. But instead, these are some good thinkers who have proposed some good ideas. We can test our wits by thinking about them, but in the end we're the ones who have got to make up our minds and so we're going to read it respectfully, but also critically, thinking 'what are the shortcomings of that great work?' And at every point we're testing our own wits, trying to make the arguments our own, so that we are never just parroting and mouthing something. So that's the kind of citizen I am after in this book and I have tried to emphasize that I think it's something that we can all sign on to as a conception of the citizen that will make us a much more deliberative democracy, that even people who are deeply religious should be able to agree that reasoning in that way, in that Socratic, Stoic style, will make for a better political community. So that's what I propose and that's why I think philosophy plays a very important part in the curriculum that I would want to see universities designing.

David Cayley

Nussbaum argues that a Stoic view of reason particularly suits democracy and, therefore, the universities of a democracy. In Cultivating Humanity she puts this view forward in defense of the reforms that have taken place in the United States since she began teaching in the 1970s. Her book, in addition to its theoretical dimension, recounts the results of an extensive four year research project, which involved Nussbaum and several graduate assistants in looking at 15 representative American universities. They ranged all the way from Brigham Young, a conservative Mormon institution, to a Boston-area business college. Nussbaum's findings are encouraging. She reports that programs of liberal study are thriving in a variety of non-elite settings, and she argues that a broader, more universal curriculum is widening the horizons of many young Americans and making them, as the Stoics said, "citizens of the world." Nussbaum also suggests in her book that the Stoic philosophy effectively addresses contemporary threats to the university's continued existence as a community based on reason. Some of these threats have come from those who argue either that reason is essentially male; or that it is a purely Western construct; or that it is a disguised form of domination. Michel Foucault, for example, sees truth not as a product of reasoning, but as an effect of power. Nussbaum sees this critique of reason as salutary but argues that it applies only to the abuses of reason, and not to the Stoic view of reason as an embodied personal practice and a universal calling.

Martha Nussbaum

A lot of what posed as reason was really informed by class prejudice or sex prejudice or all kinds of prejudice, and of course that was true in science when research was done on gender difference. It was often extremely bad research by traditional standards of scientific rationality, but it wore the mantle of reason and it had great prestige for that reason. And so too, in anthropology, a lot of what passed as rational observation of

other cultures was really deeply informed by bias and by one's own sense of privilege. Probably anthropology was by no means the worst on this — philosophy was probably worse because of its cultural narrowness — but a lot of statements that were made about other cultures were extremely ill informed. Still I think it's quite another thing to say that the norms or reason themselves are defective and I think that today you often find a slide from one to the other. Just because we can show that a lot of people who wore the mantle of reason were really prejudiced, ignorant and in general not doing very good work, therefore people think that it's been shown that those norms themselves are ignoble and that we have to turn to something else. Now I think then the problem comes for these people, what is the other thing we turn to, because most of the people who assail reason are themselves convinced of certain very fundamental moral things, that is that people should have equal rights, that deprived, oppressed people should be treated better than they've been treated before and so the question is where in their view, is there room for an account of what's oppressive and why? What's wrong with oppression? What should be resisted and why? And I think Foucault was in many ways a great thinker for what he says about the origins of oppression and the way in which claims to rationality could function as devices of oppression, but what I find disturbing in Foucault in the end, is that there's this general injunction to resist, but there's no story about what should be resisted and why. Unless we have some idea of human dignity, the badness of certain kinds of treatment of a human being as a means rather than an end, all of the things that the Stoics had, I think we really, in the end, can't tell people why they should resist and what they should resist. Although I don't mean to say that I don't think Foucault offers valuable insights, but I think that the lack of a rational norm and a rational justification of that norm really is a tremendous problem for anyone who wants to use it for progressive ends.

David Cayley

Martha Nussbaum criticizes the cultural left for a view of reason that she thinks is incoherent and self-defeating. She is equally hard on the academic right, whom she sees as engaged in uncritical tradition mongering. Her approach is to seek the middle way. She deplores chauvinism about Western culture, but she also deplores the relativism that is frequently seen as its only alternative. This feeling for the golden mean is evident in her approach to the various programs of special studies, like women's studies or African-American studies, that have been established since the 1960's. Many critics see these programs as an instance of what Allan Bloom calls the university's "decomposition" and an abdication of its duty to integrate rather than to segregate. Nussbaum acknowledges the risk of re-segregation. In fact, she tells in her book the story of a promising African-American student of hers who was pressured into quitting philosophy by the brothers of his all-black fraternity. They convinced him that such an interest lay outside his racial identity. But, even so, she argues that programs of special studies are a desirable way of focusing scholarship on new and neglected knowledge.

Martha Nussbaum

I think these special programs have a great intellectual value in the following sense, that they bring people together from many established disciplines to think about a common set of problems, just the way that a classics department is an interdisciplinary network of people, some of whom are archeologists, some of whom are philosophers, some of whom are literary scholars and they get a lot of mileage of being in the same place together and talking together, because the whole study of the ancient world then become multi-faceted and very rich. I think it can be the same in a department of African-American studies. Women's studies, of course is so much broader that it poses somewhat different problems, but I think generally that people who come together from different departments into an interdisciplinary program like this can profit by it greatly as scholars and can create very exciting kinds of courses. What I think is very pernicious, is if that's taken to be a sign to students that this study is only for people who have a certain kind of identity. So that if women studies gives the signal that only women should come and study here, that this is all about women affirming a special gender identity or if an African-American studies department gives the signal that this is a way in which African-American students can affirm their separate identity, that's pernicious for a number of reasons. First of all, of course, because it tells the other students that needn't come and learn. That to me is the worst thing about that because these are areas of study that are tremendously important for all students and not just for people already have a certain identity. And then I think second, because it sometimes gives the students in the group the idea that somehow it's in their blood or they know it already and it's not a form of study and I think that's not true. There's absolutely no reason why being born female gives you access to knowledge about how women have lived in history. So you need it to be a genuine form of rigorous academic study and sometimes such programs lose rigour and become mere confessional expression of your gender identity. But I think those defects, while they're certainly there in some places, I think there are a lot more universities that I saw where those defects are avoided and where those programs supply essential richness to the curriculum, offering students something that all of them need to have if they're going to be well-rounded and good citizens and that is a much better understanding than most of our citizens have of the history and legacy of slavery and racism in this country, for example, much more knowledge than most people had in previous eras of the obstacles to women's equality in history, of the contributions that women have made in spite of these obstacles and so on. So I think the main thing is to say that this is a domain of learning and scholarship which is important for all students.

David Cayley

North American university education has changed radically during the last forty years. A lot of the commentary inspired by this change has suggested that it has been much for the worse. Martha Nussbaum sees these complaints about the decadence of the university as mainly a lament for the passing of "a gentleman's education". The contemporary university, in her view, is engaged in what she calls "an unparalleled experiment" in democratic education. And even allowing for her admittedly cheerful

disposition, she says that this experiment so far has been a remarkable success.

Martha Nussbaum

I guess it's part of my character that I am an optimist, but I also believe Kant is right, that you ought to adopt some optimistic practical postulates in order to keep things going in a good direction, that even where you're in doubt about whether things are going in a good direction, it's better to be optimistic than pessimistic because this will motivate you and others to be constructive rather than cynical or burned out. But I actually do think that we've come a tremendous way. I mean, look, we're the most democratic system of higher education in North America that ever has been, just in terms of the range of students and their backgrounds that we try to educate, and for a while it was a very bizarre thing. We thought we'd take this very wide range of students and we'd teach them the gentleman's education. Now wasn't that strange, rather than to think 'we're educating for a democracy and so we'd better think what a democratic citizen should know.' And so I think we've come a long way in thinking well about that question. Instead of just trying to feed the old elite education to a wider range of people, we're thinking what a truly democratic education should be and we're thinking that in this current world that must involve thinking more about women, about race, about non-western cultures.

We haven't got it perfect and of course, a lot of these programs are strapped for lack of money and lack of support in an era where there's increasing pressure to be pre-professional and pre-vocational. I'm worried, very worried about that kind of pressure and I want to be optimistic about the humanities partly in order to keep people aware of their tremendous importance for our survival as a democracy. I think it would be a terrible thing if we cut back humanities budgets, thinking that the only sound kind of education is a pre-vocational education.

But I do think we have reason for optimism when we look to see where we've come from and how much more fully we've been able to include all our citizens, both as students but also then, as objects of study and I think the two do go hand in hand. Because if you see that your own life isn't included in what gets studied that does send a message that the culture doesn't care than anyone should understand you and what does that mean? It means you're a second class citizen.

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David Cayley

Martha Nussbaum's book Cultivating Humanity originated in the battle about who should go to university and what they should be taught, that flared up in the 1980's. The same period, and the same struggle, also gave birth to the second book I want to discuss tonight, Gerald Graff's Beyond the Culture Wars. Graff saw the conflict, and the crisis it produced, as an opportunity for American higher education. To him the really worrying problem was not the somewhat overblown threat to the classics - it was the alienation and ambivalence of many students - and he saw, in the struggle over the

power to define what counts as culture, a chance to make education more vital and more engaging for them. Why not, he proposed, "teach the conflicts" and let the arguments enliven the curriculum.

Gerald Graff has been teaching English literature in American universities since 1963 and is currently the George M. Pullman Professor of the Humanities at the University of Chicago. He says that one of the incidents that prompted him to write Beyond the Culture Wars was an invitation to appear on The Oprah Winfrey Show. Allan Bloom had just published his best selling The Closing of the American Mind, and Graff was asked to come on the show as someone who disagreed with Bloom.

Gerald Graff

They needed somebody to debate Bloom and a funny thing happened to my thinking as soon as I was invited on. Before going on the show, I started to imagine what it would be like and I started to think of Bloom differently. He was still my antagonist in a way, my ideological rival. He was somebody that I was there to disagree with, but once I imagined myself being on the show I started thinking of him as a collaborator in a way, since after all, he and I would have to find some way to produce a coherent discussion of complicated intellectual issues on daytime TV and we were at least collaborators in the sense that we were in this thing together as far as not boring poor Oprah's audience to death. And I realized in many ways, that the very conflict between Bloom and me brought us a lot closer together than either of us would be to probably a lot of people in the audience, that in order to engage in conflict with somebody you have to be in the same ballpark, talking the same kind of talk. That's why I think there's a kind of irony in the antagonism of the academic left and right, in the conflict, let's say, between feminists on the one hand and traditionalist scholars on the other. They couldn't have that conflict unless they were in some ways closer to each other than they are to many of the students who don't identify with either group. In fact, many of our students would see Bloom and somebody like me as very much the same kind of person, very different from themselves, both of us being professors, intellectuals, eggheads and so forth who talk about high-minded subjects like relativism, not the kinds of subjects that they and their parents and friends talk about.

David Cayley

Graff's recognition that he had more in common with Allan Bloom than with Oprah's audience led him to ask whether the same might not be true of the audience for university education, the students. Yes, he and his colleagues were engaged in bitter controversy about the curriculum; but by far the more significant gulf, he came to feel, was the one separating the bulk of the students from the whole academic enterprise.

Gerald Graff

It won't do us much good to replace Shakespeare with Toni Morrison or to bring in Toni Morrison alongside Shakespeare, which I think is what's happening most often. It's not going to do us a lot of good to win the battle of the canon to bring in texts by women

and minorities, if a lot of the students still need the Cliff's Notes in order to read a novel by Toni Morrison the way they perennially needed the Cliff's Notes to make sense of a play by Shakespeare, or at least to write a paper about it. And I think, to some extent, the whole controversy over the canon has been misplaced in so far as it assumes that the quality of education depends entirely on which texts will be taught or which materials will be taught. I think only in part is that the case. If students can't talk the talk of academic culture, or intellectual culture — it's not just academic — if students can't make arguments effectively, or can't write a consecutive argument or can't manipulate the vocabulary of intellectual analysis, they're not going to do very well whether the subject matter is Toni Morrison or Alice Walker or Shakespeare.

David Cayley

Graff has noted this estrangement between students and intellectual culture at the elite universities, as well as at less prestigious institutions. He believes it reflects something more than just inadequate preparation. The step into bookish culture is a momentous one, Graff says, and many students hesitate to take it.

Gerald Graff

I think that there is an ambivalence towards intellectuality. I wouldn't call it anti-intellectualism. I would call it ambivalence... 'Do I really want to talk this kind of talk? Do I really want to commit my life to being analytic and talking about the hidden meanings of everything and analyzing everything?' I think most American students are to some extent ambivalent about that proposition, as why shouldn't they be? Most of the culture is. So I think sometimes we ignore the amount of ambivalence or even anti-intellectualism that persists in the student bodies of universities like Chicago or Princeton or Harvard, places that are reputed to be centres of egg-headism.

David Cayley

Introducing students to the controversies inspired by classic texts, in Graff's experience, is a good way to get them over their fear of egg-headism. And many enduring books, he thinks, invite this approach. Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn is a much debated, and occasionally banned, current example. The question is whether the book endorses racism, as it seems to some readers, or exposes and denounces it, as it seems to others. Graff has presented both perspectives in a new edition of the book he and James Phelan have just published. This so-called "critical controversies" edition - the first of a series - surrounds the novel with 17 interpretative essays, and biographical information about Mark Twain, framing the text within the issues it raises. He takes a similar approach in a unit he teaches at the University of Chicago on Joseph Conrad's controversial 1899 novella The Heart of Darkness, a book pervaded by the European image of Africa as the Dark Continent. Graff teaches it alongside Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, a novel that documents the impact of the West on Africa from the African point-of-view. He says that this approach helps students to focus and motivate their reading.

Gerald Graff

When I do this well, I get the feeling that I'm helping; and the students tell me that this kind of unit helps them to read the two novels more effectively, that is, they know what they're looking for. They're looking for a particular issue when they read the book. Whereas, without such a focalizing issue, they're not exactly sure how to read the book.

We tend to think of reading books as a rather unproblematic activity. At first sight it seems rather simple. Either you can read the book or you can't. But I think that increasingly educators are finding that to read effectively you need a kind of context. You need a cultural context and the culture wars I think provide one useful kind of cultural context. There are others as well, but I think that debate has a lot of potential as a way of framing the reading of books so that students can do better at understanding books and talking about books.

David Cayley

Gerald Graff's view of reading as an activity shaped by context is distinctly different from the view Allan Bloom takes in The Closing of the American Mind. There Bloom commends what he calls "the Great Books approach." This approach consists, in his words, of "reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them -not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read." Graff thinks that this is a pipe dream for most undergraduates because without what Bloom calls "categories we make up" the students simply don't know where they are with the books at all. To Graff, the very act of reading demanding old books implies some prior sense of why, and in what way they are supposed to matter. Books read in universities are also read within an interpretive community, a community constituted by the manner in which it analyzes and argues about intellectual questions. This community and its etiquette constitute what Graff calls argument culture.

Gerald Graff

For me, education is ultimately best thought of as entry into argument culture, the culture of argument. Even in the sciences I think that's what it involves. To become a good scientist you need to prove your hypothesis to other workers in that field. I think all the academic fields are involved in argument, even in mathematics where the language used is a mathematical language, you ultimately have to translate your discourse into arguments. The phrase "argument culture" is interesting of course, because now Deborah Tannen has published a book called Argument Culture which deplores the fact that we have become so much a culture in which we're always fighting with each other. And I can appreciate some of Deborah Tannen's concerns. Often the quality of public argument that we have in our present culture is pretty low and sometimes instead of real argument, you have name-calling and mud-slinging and something like the verbal equivalent of mud-wrestling on talk shows and so forth. But to me that would be an argument for improving the quality of our argument culture rather than trying to think that we should be something else.

David Cayley

Argument, in Graff's opinion, is inescapable. Even when linguist Deborah Tannen deplores the disputatiousness of contemporary culture, she is still necessarily making an argument against argument. There are, of course, different kinds of argument, and some critics of Graff's book have suggested that productive argument will only be possible once some of the bitterness and rancor that Deborah Tannen is talking about have been drawn out of the culture. In this view, one has first to make peace, and only then to argue. Graff regards the idea as unrealistic.

Gerald Graff

My argument is that instead of thinking that we have to wait for this utopian moment when we feel comfortable enough to have an argument, let's start the argument first and hope that the process of arguing and discussing and thrashing out our differences will produce that feeling of comfort with each other that we're looking for. In other words, I think that this safe zone or comfortable zone in which a culture can argue out its differences, has to be a result of conflict not a precondition. I think if we say that we can't talk to each other until we feel comfortable with each other, well, when is that ever going to happen? Better to begin the discussion, have it out, keep talking, out of the faith that eventually we will treat each other in a more civilized way. I think something like that already actually does happen. A model would be domestic disputes where this is a basic tactic of conflict resolution when you get people arguing with each other. Maybe in the first stages they'll be screaming at each other and not behaving very respectfully, but often what happens is that the second time they come back and apologize and somebody says 'well you know, I've been thinking and what you said last time now makes more sense to me than when you said it and I'm sorry I got angry.' People need to go through a process in order to feel more comfortable thrashing out their differences. I think this is especially a problem in academic culture where frequently academics just don't see each other very often. We're locked into our classrooms and are not engaged in a regular process of working out our differences so that when debates do break out they're peculiarly frightening and scary and everyone goes off angry and then that leads to the conclusion that we can't argue with each. We tried that and it just didn't work. I think that conditions in which students are not exposed to the basic arguments that are going on around them are anti-educational. I want to create conditions under which students can learn and the only conditions under which you can really expect to learn something are ones where the issues are being debated.

David Cayley

One reason why the issues usually aren't being debated, Graff suggests, is the atomized structure of the modern university. The institution has grown by endlessly adding new subjects, new departments, and new programs, and the result, he says, is a kind of crazy quilt, in which there is not much relationship between the pieces.

Gerald Graff

The assumption I think, at the founding of the modern university around the turn of the century, was that if you got a lot of specialists in different disciplines working on their own thing, that it would all add up in some way to a coherent whole. The idea I suppose was that since the universe of knowledge is ultimately unified in some way, if you set free academic inquirers to pursue truth by their own lights, then what will result will be an organized and unified world of knowledge. And I think the theory makes sense in a way, but I think it increasingly is broken down as all these little inquirers end up coming back with conflicting reports or conflicting interpretations of what the knowledge means or how it should be used. And I think we can see from our present vantage point that modern educational institutions have had no way of dealing with conflict. They don't know what to do with it. What they basically have done is separate people. In other words, if Professor A argues one way and Professor B argues another the strategy is to keep Professors A and B separate so that they can't get in each other's way. And that worked for a while. While there was a lot of money coming into the system you could infinitely expand the playing field and create a cushion for conflict. Well, all that has ended. We don't have the luxury now to buy space for these warring professors and we find our selves embarrassingly lacking in any mechanism for negotiating conflict.

David Cayley

Many of the books that have been written about the university in recent years have been based on the assumption that consensus is the only possible source of coherence for the university. The fact that consensus is plainly out of reach explains the often desperate tone of such books. Graff believes that conflict can also provide coherence. Learning how to address differences, he says, is the very essence of learning how to live together.

Gerald Graff

My theories have as much to do with community as they do with conflict. To me community and conflict aren't opposed. As I was saying before, Allan Bloom and I couldn't begin to have a conflict if we weren't part of the same academic community or part of the same discourse community, or in the same conceptual ballpark. So I think our thinking about conflict and community is often misguided in so far as we think of conflict as the absence of community or the enemy of community. I see it as a source of a new kind of academic community, which would be based on debate and difference rather than consensus.

David Cayley

How this new academic community is to be built is a problem with which Gerald Graff is currently engaged at his own university. As things now stand, students are exposed to a succession of professors, many of whom hold utterly incompatible views. The differences between them are never debated, clarified, or even mentioned. The way to deal with this, Graff thinks, is first to recognize such differences as significant and

educationally fruitful for the students, and then to create forums in which they can be aired. This means modifying an academic format based completely on separate courses in such a way that conversation between courses becomes possible.

Gerald Graff

We're trying to develop the academic symposium or conference as an intra-curricular structure. Since I've been a professor I've always felt a split in my own life between my teaching life on the one hand and my life going to conferences or symposia or giving talks at other institutions and I've always noticed that I had a great time when I went to a conference and there was a lot of lively debate and discussion and parties and so forth. And I've noticed that I'm not the only one who feels that way, that conference culture is always more stimulating and enjoyable and rewarding, intellectually rewarding, than life at home. And I've often wondered why couldn't we recreate some of the features of conference culture at our home campus, especially since not only was conference culture more fun, I often learned more at the conferences, talking to people. 'What's going on? Who's doing what? Why? What are the trends of our field?' and so forth. One thing we've done in the Master of Arts program in the Humanities at Chicago, which I'm directing, is bring in the academic conference as a feature of the regular curriculum. In other words, have periodic conferences which the students, as well as the faculty, participate in, on central issues throughout the course of the year. The program culminates with the student work-in-progress conference. The students write an MA thesis in our program as the culminating project that they do and we have the students present their theses. At least some present. And then they give critiques of each other's theses and have discussions of them and we have faculty come in and react to them. I've seen this done in freshman programs elsewhere. It can work very well. The University of North Carolina at Greensboro had a freshman program based on teaching the conflicts. The conflict the year that I observed was Darwin versus Genesis, the evolutionary theory versus the Bible, an issue of great interest in the South, in North Carolina. This could be done much more frequently. I think we tend too readily to think of academic conferences and talks and events as extra-curricular, as things that go on after hours. Why not build the symposium into the class, which would be a way of linking one class with other classes. I think the secret of linking classes and creating a conversation out of classes the way I've been recommending is to make more use of the extra-curriculum in the curriculum.

David Cayley

Gerald Graff wants to knit the university together by creating more opportunities for interchange and more sources of common experience. He hopes in this way to add conviviality as well as coherence to the university's curriculum. His aim, at all times, is to engage the students and find ways of unlocking the pleasures and intrigues of academic life for them. Because in the end, he says, the most important question about the culture wars is not who's winning, but whether the students are invited to play.

Gerald Graff

The real problem of education to me is not that the forces of reason aren't winning, or the forces of a bad kind of reason are winning. The big problem of education for me is that education is largely unintelligible to 80% to 90% of the student body. That is, the culture of what people are supposed to study is not intelligible. To put it even more bluntly, the students much of the time or most of the time, don't know what the teachers are talking about. The teachers are talking in their little world of intellectual coherence which makes sense to them, or to some of them, and the students are pretending to understand and limping along and, you know, getting good enough grades to get by, but there is a huge and depressing and increasing gap between the culture of the teachers and the culture of the students. It's getting worse as the culture of the teachers gets more complicated, more diverse. In my vision of education we all fight for our particular answers or solutions, but we do it in a way that's more intelligible than what we now succeed in doing.

Lister Sinclair

"The Education Debates" were written and prepared by David Cayley. The series was produced by Alison Moss, with associate producers Liz Nagy and Kathleen Pemberton. Technical direction was by David Field.

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